GOLD STANDARD GUIDELINES

FOR SAFE AND ETHICAL SEX WORK RESEARCH IN EUROPE

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ABOUT ESWA

The European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance (ESWA) is a sex worker-led network proudly representing more than 100 organisations in 30 countries across Europe and Central Asia. Our aim is to ensure that all sex worker voices are heard and that our human, health and labour rights are recognised and protected. With our actions and approach inspired by our membership community, we work to build a strong, vibrant and sustainable network that mobilises national, regional and international advocacy activity that moves us towards long-term, systemic change. Our mission is to build a network of member organisations and allies united in the fight for sex worker rights –advocating for the development of law, policy and practices that respect and protect the human, health and labour rights of sex workers in Europe and Central Asia.

ABOUT ESWORN

The European Sex Work Research Network (ESWORN) was launched at the ESWA Congress in 2022. Hosted and coordinated by the European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance (ESWA), ESWORN brings together researchers working on sex work across Europe and Central Asia. Membership is open to doctoral and postdoctoral researchers, PhD candidates, and Master's students who either have lived experience of sex work or strong connections to sex worker–led movements. The network welcomes scholars from all disciplines, including criminology, public health, socio-legal studies, and beyond, who are engaged in research related to sex work in the region. The network's purpose is to connect researchers, support community-grounded knowledge production, and strengthen advocacy through evidence. Its overarching objective is to foster meaningful collaboration between researchers and sex worker communities.

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INTRODUCTION

Academic research related to sex work brings up many ethical issues and remains a deeply contentious topic. While not all research about sex work comes from academia, academic research is the most common – and often the most harmful. Academia has long been criticised for its colonial and paternalistic structures,[1] and for mistreating marginalised communities – by misrepresenting their experiences, exploiting their stories, or excluding them altogether.[2] Many sex workers have responded by expressing distrust toward academic work, and voicing concerns that researchers build careers 'on the backs' of sex workers, often with little benefit to them and sometimes causing direct harm.[3] Sex workers' rights organisations are frequently contacted by researchers asking for access or support – yet they are often under-resourced, and supporting academic projects is rarely their priority, particularly when the benefits to their communities are unclear.[4] This guidance document aims not only to highlight and challenge some of these problems, but also to promote better ways of doing research. These approaches put the needs and rights of sex workers at the centre.

One of the main criticisms from sex worker communities is that sex work research often fails to reflect their realities. Sex workers are frequently left out of the research process – from setting agendas and shaping questions to influencing policies and other outcomes. One result of this exclusion has been a heavy focus, especially in public health, on HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, with the aim of stopping transmission. While often well-intentioned, this body of research reinforces the idea that sex work is linked to 'disease' and (even unintentionally) spreads the harmful myth that sex workers are 'vectors of disease.' This myth has shaped laws and policies around the world, penalising sex workers and making it harder for us to access health services.[5]

Another common lens is trafficking. A lot of research in this area treats sex workers as victims of trafficking, ignoring their agency and framing them primarily as people who need rescuing. This has led to harmful policies that further marginalise sex workers and worsened their living and working conditions.[6] Gender equality research, too, often looks at sex work through ideas like consent, bodily autonomy, and sexuality. While these are important topics, such studies can turn sex workers into subjects of intervention, rather than recognising them as autonomous people – especially when they fail to engage directly with their real lives. These kinds of studies, and related bodies of work, have also paid more attention to clients than to the things sex workers say matter most – from social and economic issues, to housing, mental health, workplace safety, and many more.

Another major problem is that academic research often fails to reflect the diversities of sex workers. Many studies rely on stereotypes – like only

1 Bhambra, G., Nişancioğlu, K. and Gebrial, D. (Eds.) (2018). *Decolonising the University*. London: Pluto.

2 Bruckert, C. (2014). Activist Academic Whore: Negotiating the Fractured Otherness Abyss. In: Kilty, J.M., Fabian, S.C., Felices-Luna, M. (Eds.) *Demarginalizing Voices: Commitment, Emotion, and Action in Qualitative Research*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

3 Global Network of Sex Worker Projects (2004). *Sex Workers Health, HIV/AIDS, Ethical Issues Care and Research*. Available: https://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/research-for-sex-work-7-english.pdf

4 Maggie's: The Toronto Sex Workers Action Project (no date). A Note to Researchers, Students, Reporters and Artists Who Are Not Sex Workers. Available: https://esplerp.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/A-note-to-researchers.pdf

5 Global Network of Sex Work Projects (2021). *The Consequences of Misinformation about Sex Work and Sex Workers*. Available: https://www.nswp.org/sites/default/files/bp_misinformation_sw_prf01.pdf

6 Agustin, L. (2007). *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry*. London: Zed Books.

focusing on outdoor sex work – and erase the full range of sex workers' identities, experiences, and ways of working. This narrow lens leads to harmful generalisations and gives a one-dimensional view of sex worker communities. It also misses how different parts of their lives – like race, gender, class, disability, sexuality, or immigration status – shape experiences. When research ignores this diversity, it can spread stigma and contributes to policies that do not meet the needs of broad and diverse sex work communities.

Because of all this, sex workers have long called for their communities to be recognised as experts in research, programme design, and policymaking[7] – guided by the principle "nothing about us, without us," which is widely embraced by sex worker-led groups.[8] This means not only involving sex workers as participants, but also recognising and supporting their roles as researchers, knowledge producers, and decision-makers throughout the research process.[9]

7 Jeffreys, E. (2009). *Sex worker-driven research: Best practice ethics*. Available: https://www.nswp.org/sites/default/files/Elena-Jeffreys-Sex-Worker-Driven-Research-1.pdf

8 Global Network of Sex Work Projects (2020). *A Smart Guide to Recognizing Sex Workers as Experts*. Available: https://www.nswp.org/sites/default/files/sg_to_sw_as_experts_nswp_-_2020.pdf

9 Jeffreys, E. (2009).

WHO ARE THESE GUIDELINES FOR?

This guidance document is primarily intended as a resource for ESWA member organisations, as well as other sex-worker-led groups outside of the network, to support them in navigating relationships with researchers. It outlines the high standards and expectations that sex worker-led organisations should insist upon when engaged by, or engaging with, researchers within and beyond academia. The document may also be useful to researchers themselves, particularly those keen to reflect on and improve their own research practices. In this respect, it may be read by members of the European Sex Work Research Network (ESWORN) – the network of researchers hosted and coordinated by ESWA – as well as by researchers working outside of this network. Although the guidance is not only for academics, it is particularly relevant to them, as academic research remains the most prolific and has often been the most harmful to sex workers.

The guidelines offered in this document are informed by ESWA's longstanding work in the sex workers' rights movement, including in our efforts to build and strengthen the evidence base on sex work. This includes conducting our own research, supporting community-led research by member organisations, and collaborating with academic institutions and allied movements. While this document is informed by a range of sources – including community knowledge, lived experience, and relevant literature – it directly draws from Laura Connelly and Victoria Holt's research project (2022-24), which involved interviews with sex workers from around the world about their views on and experiences of (un)ethical and (ir)responsible research with sex worker communities.[10] Because this is not an academic report, and to keep the document accessible to a wide audience, citations have been kept to a minimum. Feedback on this document has been provided by ESWORN members, as well as by ESWA member organisations – that is, sex-work-led organisations. We are grateful to those who shared their expertise with us.

10 Connelly, L. and Holt, V. (2022-24) *(Un)ethical and (ir)responsible research with sex workers*. Unpublished research project.

WHAT ARE RESEARCH ETHICS?

Research ethics is a general term used to describe different ways of thinking about what is morally right and wrong in the context of research.[11] It is often understood as a set of principles that should guide the practice of researchers. These principles help to make sure that research does not harm the researcher, the people taking part, or anyone else – and that the relationships built through research are respectful and fair.[12]

Contemporary approaches to research ethics are often traced back to the egregious abuses inflicted upon Jews by Nazi doctors during the Second World War in the name of 'scientific advancement.' These atrocities led to the creation of the Nuremberg Code in 1949, a landmark document that laid the foundation for future ethics guidelines on research involving human subjects.[13] The Nuremberg Code was followed by the Declaration of Helsinki in 1964, which aimed to balance the welfare of people taking part in research with the goals of scientific research. Both documents still influence how research ethics are understood and applied today.

Many researchers start by thinking about four key values, first written down by Beauchamp and Childress in 1979: autonomy (respecting people's rights to make their own choices); beneficence (doing good); non-maleficence (not causing harm); and justice (fairness and equal treatment).[14] However, not everyone agrees on what research ethics should look like in practice. Different research methods and settings have different standards – for example, research using interviews may follow different ethical principles than research using statistics, and working online can raise different issues than working in person.

11 Israel, M. and Hay, I. (2006). *Research Ethics for Social Scientists*. London: Sage.

12 Clark, T., Foster, L. and Bryman, A. (2018). *How to Do Your Social Research Project or Dissertation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

13 Ibid.

14 Beauchamp, T. L. and Chuldress, J. F. (1979). *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

WHY SHOULD RESEARCH ADHERE TO ETHICAL STANDARDS?

Some of the key reasons why research should follow ethical standards relate to:

- **RESPECTING THE RIGHTS, DIGNITY AND WELL-BEING OF PARTICIPANTS:**
  Ethical guidelines help ensure that people taking part in research are treated with respect, their choices are honoured through informed consent, and steps are taken to minimise any potential harm or discomfort they may experience.

- **MAINTAINING TRUST AND ACCOUNTABILITY:**
  Ethical research builds trust – not only between researchers and participants, but also with the wider communities we come from, and to some extent, with the public, funders and policymakers. By following ethical standards, researchers show a commitment to honesty, accountability and transparency, which helps strengthen the credibility of their work.

- **PROMOTING EQUITY AND FAIRNESS:**
  Ethical research is about making sure things are done fairly. It means working respectfully, especially with communities who are often marginalised. By sticking to ethical practices, researchers help avoid exploitation and discrimination, and create a more just and equal research environment.

- **SHOWING PROFESSIONALISM:**
  Acting ethically is part of being responsible and professional in research. Researchers have a duty to behave in line with agreed values and expectations. Ignoring these responsibilities can damage the quality of the research and harm the reputation of those involved – individuals, organisations, and institutions.

- **COMPLIANCE WITH LEGAL AND REGULATORY REQUIREMENTS:**
  In many cases, ethical standards are also backed by legal rules that govern how research should be done. Researchers need to follow relevant laws, regulations, and institutional policies to avoid the risks that come with unethical behaviour.

WHY DOES SEX WORK RESEARCH REQUIRE PARTICULAR ETHICAL CONSIDERATION?

Research involving 'at risk' populations is widely understood to require extra care compared to other studies involving people.[15] In this regard, research involving sex workers must be held to higher ethical standards, given the widespread marginalisation, stigmatisation, and criminalisation sex workers face across the world. Sex workers also often (although not always) live at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression. They are discriminated against not just because of their work, but also because of their gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, nationality, and/or immigration status. Research involving sex workers should never put the people taking part at risk. This is especially true for those working in criminalised settings or at risk of deportation. Researchers must also be mindful of the serious harm that can occur if sex workers are 'outed' – whether through participation in a study or through leaks, breaches of confidentiality, or legal orders to release data.[16] These include the risk of child removal, eviction, arrest, deportation, job loss, or being kicked out of education.[17]

There are two important caveats to note when saying that sex work research requires higher ethical standards. First, that does not mean sex workers should be treated as 'victims'. Quite the opposite. Ethical research should avoid reinforcing tired stereotypes of sex workers as either 'victims' or 'offenders' – a harmful divide that has long been used to justify state control over their lives.[18] A core message running through this guidance document is that sex workers' autonomy and decision-making should always be respected. Second, saying that sex work research needs higher ethical standards does not mean that all sex workers face the same levels of stigma, risk, or marginalisation. In fact, ethical research with sex workers must reject the idea that sex workers are one uniform group. Instead, it should recognise and respond to the diversity in identities, experiences, and circumstances – and the different ways sex workers engage in and with research.

15 Bhalerao, R., Hamilton, V., McDonald, A., Redmiles, E.M. and Stohmayer, A. (2022). Ethical practices for security research with at-risk populations. *022 IEEE European Symposium on Security and Privacy Workshops (EuroS&PW)*, Genoa, Italy, 2022, pp. 546-553.

16 Bloomquist, K. (no date). SWOP USA Fact Sheet: Ethical Considerations for Conducting Sex Work Research. Available: https://www.hydra-berlin.de/fileadmin/_hydra/Infos___Materialien/ETHICAL_RESEARCH_WITH_SEXWORKERS_FACTSHEET.pdf

17 Bowen, R. (2021). *Work, Money and Duality: Trading sex as a Side Hustle*. Bristol: Policy Press; Mac, J. and Smith, M. (2018). Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights. London: Verso.

18 Doezema, J. (1998). Forced to choose: Beyond the voluntary v. forced prostitution dichotomy. In: K. Kempadoo and Jo Doezema (Eds.) *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition*. London: Taylor and Francis.

WHAT METHODOLOGIES CAN HELP TO PROMOTE ETHICAL PRACTICE IN SEX WORK RESEARCH?

While a range of methods are used in sex work research, traditional approaches such as one-to-one interviews have tended to dominate, particularly in academic studies. Yet in recent years, a growing body of research has challenged these traditional approaches, including work using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) model. PAR is a social research methodology that focuses on two things: working together to explore a topic (participation) and using research to bring about change (action).[19] It is not only used by university-based researchers – many working outside academia have led the way in developing and applying PAR in sex work research, including at ESWA.[20]

PAR is often seen as a way to reduce some of the ethical risks that come with doing sex work research. A key part of PAR is that the people who would traditionally be treated as 'subjects' of research become equal partners in the process.[21] That means sex workers – who are often excluded from mainstream research – can help shape all stages of a project, from deciding what questions to ask to sharing the final findings. This helps make sure sex workers' knowledge, skills and lived experience are taken seriously and built into the work from the start. In this sense, PAR values experiential knowledge: the kind that comes from actually doing sex work. It challenges narrow ideas of who counts as an 'expert' and what counts as expertise.

Yet, as Connelly and Holt's work reminds us, PAR is not a guaranteed fix for ethical research.[22] It can be watered down, misused, or done badly – and in those cases, it risks becoming both tokenistic and harmful. Some sex workers have pointed out that in projects labelled PAR, their involvement was limited to doing fieldwork – mainly helping with recruitment – rather than being included in the decisions that shape the research. Even in so-called PAR projects, sex workers' knowledge and expertise is still often ignored when it comes to designing the study, analysing the findings, or deciding how the results are shared.

Participant-Driven Action Research (PDAR) builds on and strengthens the principles of PAR. In PDAR, sex workers are not just participants – they help design the research from the ground up. They shape the frameworks, questions, and processes and take the lead, rather than acting as data sources or facilitators for someone else's agenda. This model helps make research more useful to sex worker communities and turns research into a tool by sex workers for sex workers.[23]

However, ethical sex work research requires more than the right methodology. It demands a deep, genuine commitment to doing research ethically. The principles outlined below offer a practical guide for researchers who want to uphold high standards when working with sex workers.

19 O'Neill, M. (2010). Cultural criminology and sex work: Resisting regulation through radical democracy and participatory action research (PAR), *Journal of Law and Society*, 37(1): 210-32.

20 ESWA. (2024) Exposed for all sites: The role of policing in sex workers' access to justice. Available: https://www.eswalliance.org/police_research_brief

21 Ibid.

22 Connelly, L. and Holt, V. (2022-24)

23 Bowen, R. and O'Doherty, T. (2014) Participant-driven action research (PDAR) with sex workers in Vancouver. In: C.R Showden and S. Majic (Eds.) *Negotiating Sex Work: Unintended Consequnces of Policy and Activism*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS OF ETHICAL SEX WORK RESEARCH

- **ACCOUNTABILITY:**
  This consideration asks researchers to think about whether they are accountable and, if so, to whom. Here, we can draw on wider writings, especially from scholar-activists, that highlights the importance of accountability in research.[24] Ethical sex work research should not be carried out by individuals working alone and in isolation, but by researchers who are embedded in sex worker communities – communities that, in turn, demand accountability. This might mean that researchers in universities need to question and push back against mainstream models of accountability in higher education, including neoliberal systems that frame universities as being accountable to the state or to students as 'consumers.'[25]

  For some sex work researchers, accountability comes from being active members of sex work communities. For others, this connection may need to be actively built – through personal, consistent relationships. These relationships take work, time, and reflection, and should be meaningful and respectful, not extractive or surface-level. When researchers are properly connected to sex work communities, this opens up real opportunities for accountability – where sex workers can challenge researchers to rethink their approach and make sure the work is genuinely useful and beneficial to sex workers.

- **USEFULNESS:**
  This consideration encourages researchers to ask whether their work is useful and, if so, useful to whom. Researchers should think carefully about why they are doing the research, and make sure the needs of sex workers are front and centre. Ethical research should not be led by academic trends, personal interests, or funder priorities, but by the priorities that sex workers identify themselves.

  For researchers working in universities, this might clash with how things usually work. For example, academia often values research that fills a 'gap in the literature' – but sex workers might have more immediate and urgent needs. Sex workers should have real input into the research process – including the questions being asked, the timelines, and the focus of the study.[26]

- **ACCESSIBILITY:**
  This consideration is about who can actually access research findings, and how they are shared. Care must be taken to ensure that research reaches the groups and communities for which it is intended. Researchers – especially those based in universities – need to go beyond traditional ways of publishing and presenting research. Ethical sex work

24 See for example: Hill Collins, P. (2013) *On Intellectual Activism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press; Pulido, L. (2009) 'Frequently (un)asked questions about being a scholar activist' In C.R. Hale (Ed.) *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*. Berkeley: University of California, pp. 341–366.

25 Joseph-Salisbury, R. and Connelly, L. (2021) *Anti-Racist Scholar-Activism*. Manchester: University of Manchester Press.

26 Brucket, C. (2014).

research should not be locked behind journal paywalls or written in ways that are only useful to other academics.

Instead, researchers should make sure that sex workers can access, understand, and use the findings.[27] This means thinking carefully about how the results are shared. Formats like blogs, community reports, zines, visuals, or podcasts can be powerful ways to share research openly. While academic publications have a role, research about sex work should not be trapped inside academic spaces.

- **LIVED EXPERIENCE:**
  This consideration stresses that researchers should not carry out sex work research without involving sex workers meaningfully in both the design and delivery of the project. Including lived experience is not just an ethical necessity – it makes richer, more accurate information that better reflects the realities of sex work. Sex workers are more likely to trust work led by or involving sex workers, and when sex workers are involved as researchers, it helps shift traditional power imbalances. Additionally, this approach produces research that is more relevant and less harmful to sex workers, as it is less likely to impose inappropriate frames and more likely to focus on the issues they think are important.

  That said, lived experience is not a magic solution. As sex workers in Connelly and Holt's research pointed out, no one sex worker speaks for all.[28] It is essential to make space for the voices of sex workers who are most structurally marginalised because an authentic voice is not always a representative one.[29]

- **DECENTRING AND/OR RECLAIMING THE ACADEMY:**
  This final consideration is about challenging the dominant role of universities in defining what counts as knowledge. Historically, Western universities have claimed to be the main authorities on 'legitimate' knowledge. Ethical sex work research pushes back against this by recognising that important, rigorous research also happens outside academia – including the work done by organisations like ESWA.

  Researchers can support this by sharing, amplifying, and learning from community-led work, and by stepping outside traditional academic norms. At the same time, there are more sex workers inside academia now – academics who are or have been sex workers. Some are open about that, others are not. Either way, our presence in universities is a kind of reclamation – challenging institutions that have long excluded sex workers. This connects with wider movements in academia – anti-racist, feminist, disability justice and others – that are working to change the structures and values of higher education. When these voices are heard, the university becomes a more inclusive place for all kinds of knowledge.

27 The Sex Workers Project of the Urban Justice Center. (2022). *Research Guide: Conducting Ethical Research on Sex Trades.* Available: https://swp.urbanjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2022/08/SWP-Research-Guide-5.17.pdf

28 Connelly, L. and Hotl, V. (2022-24)

29 Brucket, C. (2014).

PRINCIPLES OF GOLD STANDARD SAFE AND ETHICAL SEX WORK RESEARCH

The principles listed below are neither exhaustive nor universal. They are a practical roadmap for ESWA member organisations, as well as other sex-worker-led groups outside of the network, to support them in navigating relationships with researchers. They are designed to help sex worker-led organisations, and sex workers more broadly, demand the highest possible standard from researchers.

At the same time, our gold standard principles should be useful to researchers engaging with sex workers and sex worker-led organisations. They can help researchers find their way through the complex realities of working with a community that is often marginalised, stigmatised, and/or criminalised.

That said, these principles are best seen as a starting point for conversation between sex workers and researchers – a foundation to build from. Sex workers are a diverse group, and their research needs, priorities, and ways of working will vary. Researchers should be open to these differences, and be ready to adapt the guidance we have offered here to fit the specific contexts they are working in – always in close and ongoing dialogue with sex workers.

Principle	Explanation	Adaptations or Considerations for Sex Work Research
Foundational Ethics and Safety		
Do no harm	Researchers should avoid actions that could cause harm – physical, emotional, social or financial – to participants, communities, or the wider public.	Researchers should be especially mindful not to retraumatise us, especially given that many sex workers have experienced harm from a range of institutions, including state institutions. Research should not increase the risks we already face.
The potential benefits must outweigh the risks	Research should aim to do good and offer clear benefits for the people taking part in the research, as well as wider communities, while minimising any risk or harm.	Involving sex workers in all parts of the research process can help make sure the benefits are real and the risks are reduced. Ask: Who asked for this research? Have sex workers said it would be useful? Is the research being done at our expense?

Principle	Explanation	Adaptations or Considerations for Sex Work Research
Ensure informed consent is practised	The people taking part in the research must fully understand what the research is about, how it will be done, and any possible risks or benefits. They should give consent freely, without any pressure from the researcher or other parties. Consent should be understood as an ongoing process rather than a one-time event.	Ongoing consent is especially important for sex workers, as our circumstances can change. We should be able to withdraw at any time without needing to explain why – including if we feel misrepresented in the research.
Protect participants privacy, if they want it	Researchers must keep personal information private and follow strict rules to store data safely. If agreed with participants, they should anonymise or pseudonymise data to make sure people cannot be identified.	Because of the stigma surrounding sex work and the serious risks of being outed, extra care must be taken to protect our identities. Researchers should be aware of the risks of digital surveillance and use secure communication tools. They should clearly explain how our data will be handled, get explicit consent, and always offer us the option to stay anonymous in any public work.
Recognise the limitations of ethical review boards	Ethics review boards (like those at universities) can help protect participants, but they do not always catch every issue – especially when it comes to research with marginalised communities. Researchers should take responsibility for going beyond these basic standards.	When it comes to sex work research, ethics boards often do not fully understand the specific risks and concerns involved. Researchers should aim to go further than minimum requirements and stay flexible if new issues come up. They should also consider seeking advice from sex worker-led organisations or networks like ESWORN to make sure their research is truly ethical and grounded in our realities – but only if we have the time and capacity to engage. Researchers should not assume we can support their work.

Principle	Explanation	Adaptations or Considerations for Sex Work Research
Vet, train and/or brief all those involved in collecting data and handling it	Everyone involved in collecting or handling research data – including interpreters – should be properly vetted, trained, or clearly briefed. They should understand the ethical principles in this document and be prepared to treat participants with care and respect. This includes having basic skills in empathic listening, de-escalation, and responding to emotional distress.	In research with sex workers, this training needs to go further. It should cover the specific challenges and risks we face, help people recognise and unlearn their biases about sex work, and ensure respectful, non-judgmental communication. Everyone involved should understand our preferred language, be able to signpost to sex worker-friendly support, and use a trauma-informed approach that upholds our autonomy and dignity.
Uphold the wellbeing of those involved in research	Researchers should take steps to protect the mental and emotional wellbeing of everyone involved in the research. This includes spotting possible risks, creating a safe and respectful space, and offering information about where to get professional support if needed.	Researchers should, wherever possible, signpost participants to support services that are known to be respectful of sex workers and offer care without judgment. If it is not possible to check how safe a service is, this should be explained clearly so participants can decide for themselves whether to use it.
Consider the implications of potential political surveillance	Researchers should be aware of the risks of political or state surveillance, especially when working with marginalised and criminalised groups. They should use secure communication, anonymisation, and protective strategies to help keep us and our data safe.	Digital surveillance is a serious concern for sex workers because of the legal and social risks we face. Researchers must take care when choosing digital tools – using encrypted apps and secure storage methods – and be cautious about how data is collected, stored, and shared. Anonymising data properly is essential to avoid exposing us and to help protect our safety and privacy.

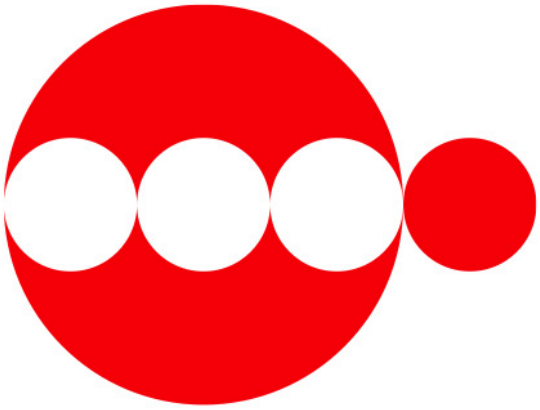
Principle	Explanation	Adaptations or Considerations for Sex Work Research
Inclusive Participation		
Compensate participants for their time and knowledge	Researchers should offer fair compensation to the people taking part for their time and expertise, recognising the valuable contributions people make to the research. Payment can also help make research more inclusive by reducing financial barriers to taking part.	Researchers should prioritise compensating sex worker participants fairly, using the method of payment we prefer – often cash, but not always. For researchers working in universities, this may mean challenging academic systems that default to gift vouchers in some countries. Where relevant, researchers should also be open to offering other kinds of (non-monetary) compensation, if this better suits our needs or situations.
Increase access to participation	In addition to fair compensation, researchers should actively reduce other barriers that might stop people from taking part – such as language, time pressures, caregiving responsibilities, or access needs. Offering things like flexible scheduling, translated materials, digital access, or support with childcare can make participation easier and more inclusive.	Researchers should think about the specific barriers sex workers might face – like needing privacy, flexible timing, or not being able to take time off work. Offering anonymous ways to take part, flexible interviews, or compensation for missed work hours can make it easier for more of us to be involved and better reflect the range of our experiences.
Ensure representation within sampling	Researchers should aim to reflect a wide range of experiences and identities in their sample. It is important to be clear about who is represented in the research – and who is not – so that any limitations are transparent.	Research should try to include different kinds of sex work and reflect the diversity within our communities. This helps make findings more relevant, accurate and useful. But researchers must never pressure us to share personal details about our work just to take part – sharing that kind of information should always be our choice.

Principle	Explanation	Adaptations or Considerations for Sex Work Research
Apply flexibility and cater to participants' preferences in data collection and participation	Researchers should be flexible and responsive to what participants need and prefer. This includes using preferred ways of communicating, being open to different times for interviews or participation, and making sure any follow-up is done in ways that feel safe and comfortable for participants.	In research with us as sex workers, flexibility is key. Many of us work non-traditional or unpredictable hours, and our lives may change quickly. Being flexible shows respect for our time and autonomy. It also helps reduce power imbalances and supports a more collaborative, person-centred approach to research.
Power and Collaboration		
Consider participatory research approaches	Researchers should consider using methods that actively involve marginalised communities in the research process. This helps make research more inclusive, empowering, and focused on the needs and priorities of the community.	Participatory approaches are especially important in sex work research, since many of us are shut out of decisions that affect our lives. But it should not be used as a tick-box – researchers need to involve sex workers meaningfully, not just on the surface.
Ensure lived experience representation	Researchers should work with the communities they are studying and include people with lived experience in the research process. Consideration should be given to the extent of collaboration, whether through consultation or co-creation.	In sex work research, this means involving sex workers at different stages of the project. Ideally, we should have real input and even control over how research is done. It is also important to reflect the diversity within our communities, especially those of us who face additional barriers because of racism, classism, ableism, or cis-heterosexism. If a study focuses on a specific area of sex work, researchers should make sure that people with direct experience of that work are part of the team.

Principle	Explanation	Adaptations or Considerations for Sex Work Research
Partner with local or national organisations	Researchers should work with local, national, or international organisations where appropriate. These partnerships can help make research more relevant, respectful, and impactful. They also build trust and ensure the work responds to real-world needs.	When partnering with sex worker-led organisations, the relationship should be genuine and two-way – not just researchers taking what they need. There should be regular, honest dialogue, and a clear respect for the knowledge and expertise we bring. Many of our organisations are underfunded, so if we are supporting a research project, researchers should offer payment for our time and input where possible.
Be mindful of power dynamics	Researchers should be aware of the social, political, economic, and/or interpersonal power differences that may exist between themselves and participants or peer-researchers. These dynamics can influence how people engage with the research. To help reduce this, researchers should take active steps to balance power – such as through collaborative approaches, flexible ways of taking part, fair payment, and involving people with lived experience throughout the process.	Researchers should recognise that sex workers are experts and should be treated as such. It is important that the way data is collected gives us control over how our experiences are represented and shared. This helps reduce bias caused by power imbalances and supports more open, honest participation.
Respectful Communication and Engagement		
Check data with the people taking part in the study	Researchers should give participants the chance to check that the information they have shared is accurate and reflects what they said.	Sex workers should be able to amend or remove anything we have said, help decide which quotes are used, and have input into how the findings and recommendations are shaped.

Principle	Explanation	Adaptations or Considerations for Sex Work Research
Use terminology favoured by the communities concerned	Language is never neutral. Researchers should use terms that reflect the preferences of the communities they are working with. This shows respect, builds trust, and helps ensure the research truly reflects the values and identities of the people involved. Researchers should talk with community members to make sure the words they use are accurate and respectful.	When researching sex work, it is essential to use language we, as sex workers, prefer – and to avoid stigmatising or outdated terms. That said, not all of us use the same words. Researchers should respect that language varies and be mindful of the different ways we describe our work and ourselves. Working closely with sex worker-led organisations can help make sure the language used is inclusive and respectful of our diverse realities.
Avoid academic jargon	Researchers should use clear, simple language that is accessible to everyone involved. If you are an academic researcher, avoid using technical or academic terms that may confuse or alienate the people taking part. Instead, use plain language that makes the research process and findings easy to understand.	While some sex workers may be familiar with academic language – especially those of us who are also researchers – others are not. Using straightforward language shows respect and helps make research more inclusive. For example, say "sharing results" instead of "disseminating findings," or explain how our lives are shaped by things like racism, poverty, gender and immigration status, rather than relying on terms like "intersectionality." Making things easy to understand helps ensure more of us can engage with, challenge, and benefit from research.
Return information to participants and communities	Researchers should make sure research findings are shared back with the people who took part and the wider community. This might mean using different ways of sharing information – like zines, social media, community events, or other open-access formats – to make sure the findings are easy to understand and use.	Researchers who are not sex workers should be careful not to enter or share work in sex worker-only spaces without invitation. It is important to respect our boundaries and choose ways of sharing that align with the preferences of sex worker communities.

Principle	Explanation	Adaptations or Considerations for Sex Work Research
Acknowledge contributions of participants and peer-researchers	Researchers should recognise and value the contributions that participants and/or peer-researchers make to the research. This could include offering credit in ways that feel appropriate and respectful. Care must be taken to protect privacy – especially when public recognition is not wanted.	For sex workers who are not publicly 'out', researchers need to find safe and flexible ways to acknowledge their input – like using pseudonyms or chosen names. Researchers could also offer things like references, referrals, or confirmation of skills gained, as long as this is led by the person's preferences. Above all, contributors should feel appreciated and respected, without having to compromise their safety or privacy.



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